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THE UPPER PART OF A WOODEN FIGURE BY ENKŪ

Almost nothing is known for certain of the career of the 17th century woodsculptor Enkū. Tradition says he was born around 1633 in the Mino area of central Honshū, and that he died in 1695, during the Genroku Period. In the years intervening he seems to have studied the teachings of the esoteric branch of the Tendai school, and to have travelled throughout Japan as a *shugenja* (mountain ascetic), even as far north as the island of Hokkaidō, then an unknown wilderness. He left in his wake great numbers of wooden carvings done in his altogether unique *natabori* ("hatchet-carving") style, mostly Buddhist figures, but including Shinto deities and likenesses of illustrious Japanese poets. Today, new carvings are constantly being discovered. Well over 1,500 are said to have been authenticated to date. Though as a sculptor he was overlooked until this century, in postwar Japan Enkū has come into his own, the many exhibitions, books, and the like that have proliferated in increasing numbers all attest to his newfound popularity. The work reproduced here is said by local tradition at the Shimmei Shrine in the city of Seki where it is preserved to be a likeness of Enkū himself, though this has been questioned. The photograph is courtesy of Taeda Mikihiro.